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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a qualitative and quantitative study in which the service learning projects of college students in special education teacher training were analyzed using elements of quality service learning as criteria. The study used the "portraiture" method of analysis, which attempts to combine empirical and aesthetic description and allow for convergence of narrative and analysis. Qualitative analysis of each student's service learning project resulted in classification as based on either the "deficit" model, the "empowerment" model, or the "reciprocal empowerment" model. This analysis examined whether the project provided quality service only (deficit model), provided quality service and involved collaboration (empowerment model), or provided quality service, involved collaboration, and represented all stakeholders' voices (reciprocal empowerment model). Results over the 4 years of the study showed a significant decrease in the percentage of projects classified as utilizing the deficit model and a significant increase in projects classified as "reciprocal empowerment". The paper supports the value of reconceptualizing and deliberately structuring the service learning environment to provide opportunities for all students to become contributors, problem solvers, and partners in improving communities. (Contains 10 references.) (DB)

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# Empowering Students with Special Needs Through Service-Learning

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## Abstract

Traditionally students with special needs have been viewed as recipients and beneficiaries of service-learning projects. This article demonstrates that service-learning pedagogy can be used to transform the traditional "deficit" model into a "reciprocal empowerment" model. The authors employed a qualitative and quantitative design. Using the qualitative method, "Portraiture", each project was analyzed and categorized under the "deficit," "empowerment," and "reciprocal empowerment" categories. The results showed a significant decrease in the percentage of projects under the "deficit" model, whereas the "reciprocal empowerment" model perspective became more prominent over the four years of the study. The authors conclude that by re-conceptualizing and deliberately structuring the service-learning environment educators can provide opportunities for **all** students to become contributors, problem solvers, and partners in improving communities.

## Empowering Students with Special Needs Through Service-Learning

John Dewey's (1916) educational and social philosophy resonate well with the development of a theory of service-learning that includes learning from experience, reflective activity, citizenship, community, and democracy. Dewey believed that public education can and should build community.

> A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. (p. 55)

Service-Learning can complement this thinking as it helps students with special needs to avoid social and cultural alienation as they learn to be active and contributing members of a broader social entity.

Service-Learning is naturally associated with situated-learning. Situated-learning focuses on the nature of the learning that takes place in a variety of contexts, typically outside the classroom. We think that service-learning projects that are inclusive and that involve students with special needs in a process and expose them to social settings where they can make a social contribution or provide meaningful service to others empower them and help them to view themselves as worthwhile and productive individuals.

The authors strongly advocate for changing the focus of service-learning in special education from a receiving orientation to a caring and sharing orientation, emphasizing reciprocal and like relationships with others. This "empowerment" model of service-learning will cultivate students with disabilities as joint partners in designing, planning and implementing service-learning projects.

A caring and sharing orientation emphasizes the reciprocal participation of all parties involved in the project as they learn and provide services to others. This "empowerment" model matches well with Gilligan's (1982) two perspectives on moral reasoning, care and justice, and her posture on the relationship between charity and social activism as orientations of service and service-learning. We advocate for service-learning projects that empower special needs students and ensure that all stakeholders are equal chance players.

Several studies have shown the impact of service-learning in producing increased personal and social responsibility and sense of competence (Weiler, LaGoy, Grane & Rovner, 1998), and acceptance of responsibility (Stephens, 1995). Melchior (1999) indicated that students, in general, who engage in quality service-learning programs reported greater acceptance of diversity. Recent literature concerning service-learning in special education indicates that service-learning occurring within the context of inclusive classrooms has potential. For example, Gent & Gurecka ( 1998) propose service-learning as a creative strategy for inclusive classrooms. They suggest that service-learning can be an effective alternative methodology in inclusive settings because of its flexibility and its focus on experiences in real life situations.

These recent studies in service-learning, with implications for character development, are compelling reasons to develop service-learning in all aspects of education. Historically, education in the United States has focused on character development from its inception (Field 1996). The very first law dealing with public education in 1640 made the development of character a central aspect of education. During the past two or three decades, however, educators have largely excluded the teaching of character from the curriculum for various reasons. For example, some attribute this exclusion to the adverse reaction against the "values clarification" movement of the '60s and '70s. Educators too often tried to make education value free—a logical and behavioral impossibility—and consciously moved away from teaching anything that looked like character education. More recently, some have shied away from character education because the phrase has often been used as code language for promoting religion in the schools and other schools have simply declared it is not the school's job.

Our schools need to educate our youth to be responsible citizens who understand and are capable of exercising their individual rights and responsibilities in a free, democratic society. Our youth need to acquire knowledge, skills and dispositions for making moral and ethical decisions that reflect the values of our democratic society. Character is about ethical and moral growth and development and service-learning helps to provide opportunities for students to experience and practice civic responsibility.

Service-Learning is a curricular strategy whereby students learn and develop through active participation in strategically organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community. It is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of students and helps them to develop as responsible citizens who deliberately strategize to fulfill civic responsibilities.

Traditionally students with special needs have been viewed as recipients and beneficiaries of service-learning projects. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the "deficit" model, which the general public promotes as "compassion for the less fortunate." We believe that service-learning pedagogy can be used to transform the "deficit" model, traditionally found in special education, into an "empowerment" model. Students with special needs will become active agents of change as service-learning projects and research is revised to focus on the whole individual, including internal and contextual influences.

There is a growing body of research on the effects of service-learning projects where students with special needs act as service providers rather than passive recipients of service. Brennan & Brennan (1999) describe how a job club at a rural high school helped students with disabilities by involving them in meaningful projects in the school and community. Muscott & O'Brien (1999) report that after participating in an inclusive after school program, 19 elementary students with behavioral and learning disabilities expressed personal responsibility, responded to ideas of cooperation and teamwork, learned to make new friends, and found learning about character to be rewarding.

**Portraiture at California Lutheran University**

The authors of this article employed a qualitative and quantitative design in which students' service-learning projects were analyzed using elements of quality service-learning as criteria. This study differs from previous studies, which were qualitative case-studies. The sample population consisted of California Lutheran University special education preservice teacher candidates and K-12 general and special education students, between Fall Semester 1996 and Spring Semester 2000. The preservice teacher candidates were working in urban public schools in Ventura County, located between Los Angeles and Santa Barbara. One third of the preservice teacher candidates were male, and two thirds were female. The majority, almost 80% of female preservice teachers were returning students who had chosen teaching as a second career. Only 15 percent of the preservice teacher candidates were Hispanic, the rest being Caucasian. The socioeconomic status (SES) of preservice teachers, K-12 teachers, and students ranged between middle to low SES.

Our study emanates from a close collaboration between university professors and preservice teacher candidates who were working in special education classrooms and involved their students with special needs in service-learning projects.

Our research qualified all service-learning projects through a methodology called, "Portraiture" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Portraiture is an important and appropriate research tool for analyzing service-learning projects. This tool allowed us to use inclusive and comprehensive means to capture the essence of service-learning stories and those of others involved in the service-learning project. Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) offer the following description of portraiture:

> Portraiture is a method framed by the traditions and values of the phenomenological paradigm, sharing many of the techniques, standards, and goals of ethnography. But it pushes against the constraints of those traditions and practices in its explicit effort to combine empirical and aesthetic description, in its focus on the convergence of narrative and analysis, and in its goal of speaking to broader audiences beyond the academy (pp. 13-14)

Portraiture enabled us to see the growth and development of students and teachers involved in projects from multiple perspectives, as their behavior is seen in authentic, self-motivating ways. Portraiture's emphasis on reflective inquiry makes it a viable research method for service-learning. It is a powerful methodology because it qualifies and values the input and participation of multiple voices.

As a result of our qualitative analysis of each service-learning project, we were able to place preservice teacher candidates' projects into one of three categories, "deficit," "empowerment," and "reciprocal empowerment." We used "Portraiture" to analyze each project and then categorized the projects using the following criteria. If the service-learning project indicated that it:

- Provides quality service (Real need in community) = "Deficit" model perspective.
- Provides quality service (Real need in community) and involves collaboration = "Empowerment" model perspective.
- Provides quality service (Real need in community), involves collaboration and represents all stakeholders' voices = "Reciprocal Empowerment" model perspective.

We generated the taxonomy (above) from the elements of high quality service-learning projects. We then quantified the results and determined percentages of service-learning projects that fell into each category over the years.

In 1996, sixty percent of the service-learning projects responded to a real need in the community, for example, preparing a Resource book for parents of students with special needs. While this project responded to a real need in the community, from the perspective of the preservice teacher candidate, it did not involve any collaboration or have the voice of the other potential stakeholders, like the parents of students with special needs, special needs students themselves, or community organizations. So, this project was quite high on quality service because it responded to a real need in the community but very low on collaboration and voice. This project was counted as a "deficit" model service-learning project. In 1997, while there was a modest increase in the quality service component and collaboration was more highly represented among the various service-learning projects, they still lacked the stakeholders' voice. These service-learning projects were counted as "empowerment" model projects. An example of the "empowerment" model perspective is a website developed for individuals with disabilities and their parents informing them about the different types of disabilities. There was collaboration with community agencies and other specialists but there was no student voice involved in the process. In 1998, "Reciprocal Empowerment" model perspectives were more prevalent. For example, a lesson plan on Disabilities Awareness was developed and presented in three high school classes. Preservice teacher candidates worked with students with disabilities as a team. Together they developed and conducted the Disabilities Awareness presentation. Following the presentation, students with severe disabilities worked in the school cafeteria, greeting students, serving silverware, and serving snacks.

**Results and Discussion**

The "Reciprocal Empowerment" model perspective became more prominent over the years of the study as students with special needs were taking a more active role in the service-learning projects. The authors speculate that one of the main reasons for this shift from the deficit model to reciprocal empowerment model emanates from the university professors' concerted efforts to ensure pre service teachers grasped the real purpose and rationale of service-learning pedagogy. The administration and the deans were particularly supportive of the professors' efforts. Thus, in the Spring Semester 1997 the

Center for Academic Service-Learning (C.A.S.L.) was established at California Lutheran University. The director of C.A.S.L. offered a series of faculty workshops on the pedagogy of service-learning. During these workshops participating faculty were introduced to a variety of strategies to successfully integrate service-learning in their courses. The professors then invited the director of C.A.S.L. to conduct workshops for pre service teachers as well. During these workshops a clear distinction was made between academic service-learning and community service, by providing specific examples of each and presenting model service-learning projects from the previous semester. These sample projects were critically assessed at the workshop, as preservice teachers were asked to rate the projects by using the elements of high quality service-learning projects as criteria.

As the number of professors adopting service-learning pedagogy increased the director of C.A.S.L., instead of conducting workshops in individual classes, organized the first service-learning symposium in Fall Semester 1997. Since then, a service-learning symposium is organized at the end of each semester and pre service teachers present their service-learning projects to students who would be conducting their own service-learning projects the following semester.

We speculate that the increase in the number of reciprocal empowerment model service-learning projects reflects preservice teachers' increased knowledge and awareness about service-learning pedagogy. The enthusiasm of the faculty for academic service-learning as a powerful pedagogy, the continuous support of the administration, and the leadership provided by the Center for Academic Service-Learning have contributed to the creation of a community of service-learners at California Lutheran University.

One of the themes that emerged from California Lutheran University's service-learning portrait was *"From prejudice and ignorance to... new understanding, acceptance, and support."* The following reflections of mainstream fifth graders who participated in a service-learning project that was designed to generate awareness about special needs students illustrate this emerging portrait from the "empowerment" model approach. The service-learning project involved special day school students with learning disabilities and mainstream fifth grade students socializing with each other by playing kickball, once a week, and then having the mainstream students reflect on their experiences. Some of their reflections stated:

- ✓ "I felt sort of nervous because I thought that they were a little weird. Now I feel great being their friend because now I know that they are nice, cool, and friendly."
- ✓ "I felt like I needed to be kind to them and if they drool on me or something not to be mad because they are special."

By maintaining the foci for learning on mainstream fifth grade students, there is no true reciprocal service-learning situation. This learning remains consistent with the "empowerment" model even thought it could extend into the "reciprocal empowerment" model by encouraging the special day school students to reflect on their socializing with the mainstream students, and then having all students share their new-found perceptions

with significant others and possibly each other. When designing service-learning projects, coordinators need to plan carefully and methodically well-designed projects to include the special needs student as a reciprocal partner in the service-learning process that will turn the "empowerment model" into the "reciprocal empowerment" model for service-learning.

Examples of "empowerment model" service learning projects conducted in October 1999 included:

- ✓ Ninth graders in a continuation school made cards for patients in a local nursing home and then delivered them to the nursing home. Feedback indicated that some of the students chose to continue as volunteers at the nursing home after the one visit.
- ✓ A special day class provided the daily lunch service at their school. They gained listening, social and critical thinking skills in the process.
- ✓ Special Education high school students tutored second graders in different subject areas for an hour and a half each day. They wrote reflective essays indicating that they can be a positive influence on others and that service can be fun!
- ✓ Middle school special education students learned about the variety of foods available and created a class cookbook as a holiday gift for their families.

Still other projects, had the preservice teacher candidates who coordinated the service-learning projects thought more deeply about the "empowerment model" could have made some poignant changes to their "deficit model" service-learning projects to generate even more powerful outcomes. Examples of these service-learning activities in October 1999 include:

- ✓ A packet of materials was developed for at-risk students to help them prepare for an up-coming job fair. What if the at-risk students were asked to collaborate in the development of the packet of materials? Again, this project could be improved and made to fit the "reciprocal empowerment" model with careful planning by building on the strengths of the students with special needs.

The following service-learning project from October 1999, provides a perfect example of how the "reciprocal empowerment" model can assist mainstream students and students with special needs. It involves a service-learning project that has high achieving students mentoring at-risk students in a junior high school. They meet each week for lunch and regularly reflect on their experiences, together. The program resulted in both improved academic achievement and school attendance. As well, friendships were developed among students of various backgrounds who would not even have considered such a friendship in the past. Underachieving students realized that it is fun to talk to students who are high achievers and they increased their class attendance rate and improved their grades. It is impossible to "prove" that these benefits emanated directly from the service-learning project, but a careful analysis of student reflections reveals the possibility that this may be the case. "I love going to these sessions because I have fun and I learn at the same time," wrote one of the participants. "When I go back to my class I understand what

the teacher is explaining," wrote another student with a record number of absences prior to participating in the service-learning project. As well, when the preservice teacher interviewed the general education teachers involved with the project, it was reported that the number of student absences had decreased and that the students were getting better grades.

An interesting example of "reciprocal empowerment model" is the "Reading to See" project. In this project second graders who were practicing how to read with feeling and proper punctuation, were provided with an opportunity to record their read aloud versions of stories from Aesop's Fables and donate their recordings to an audiotape library at the Braille Institute. The students accompanied by their teacher and the preservice teacher candidate went to the Braille Institute to do a live recording of the fables and to donate their taped stories to the library. However, a big surprise was waiting for them at the Braille Institute. After they were through reading their fables, one of the teenagers with visual impairment read a fable aloud using a Braille book.

By October 2000, out of the one hundred and eighty-two service-learning projects completed for Special Education course credit at California Lutheran University, thirty percent of the projects fell under the "deficit" model category, forty-five percent of the projects fell under the "empowerment" model category, and twenty-five percent represent the "reciprocal empowerment" model, which is characterized by the true spirit of service-learning which encourages equal, joint, collaborative participation of both mainstream students and students with special needs.

Our research indicates that California Lutheran University's special education preservice teacher candidates, over time, have been able to move away from the "deficit" model of service-learning to a "reciprocal empowerment" model that benefits all participants. The rationale that emerges from our research for making this shift is sound and simple. Students need models from which to learn, and they need to practice citizenship if they are to live it. This research provides qualitative evidence supporting the notion that, students who participate as reflective learners in service-learning are enhancing their ability to fulfill their civic responsibilities. This seems to be true for students with special needs as well as for mainstream students. Through the "reciprocal empowerment" model, students with special needs become responsible citizens instead of problems for the community. By re-conceptualizing and deliberately structuring the service-learning environment and engaging students with special needs in learning that centers on critical community issues, educators provide opportunities for them and other stakeholders to become contributors, problem solvers, and partners in improving communities.

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